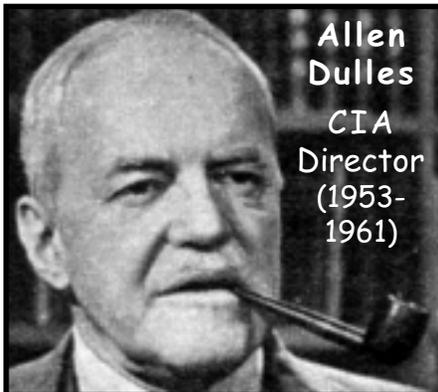


1954: Covert War in Guatemala

By Jim Huck, a college teacher of political science, U.S. history and international relations for 30 years.

In 1951, social democrat Jacobo Arbenz became Guatemala's first popularly elected president. In the 1953-1954 legislature, Arbenz had a majority and the communists only had 4 of 51 seats. But Secretary of State



Allen
Dulles
CIA
Director
(1953-
1961)

Operation PBFORTUNE

The first CIA effort to overthrow Arbenz was a collaboration with Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, authorized by President Truman in 1952. By February 1952, the CIA was writing memos, like "Guatemalan Communist Personnel to be disposed of during Military Operations," outlining categories of people to be neutralized "through Executive Action" (murder), imprisonment or exile.

Operation PBSUCCESS

Authorized by President Eisenhower in August 1953, this operation had a \$2.7 million budget for "psychological warfare and political action" and "subversion." The last stage of PBSUCCESS called for "roll-up of Communists and collaborators." After the CIA installed Castillo Armas in power, hundreds of Guatemalans were rounded up and killed. Between 1954 and 1990, human rights groups estimate, the repressive operatives of successive military regimes murdered more than 100,000 civilians.

Source: Kate Doyle and Peter Kornbluh, "CIA and Assassinations: The Guatemala 1954 Documents," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 4*. <www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsaebb/nsaebb4/>

John Foster Dulles claimed that Guatemalans were living under a "communism type of terrorism" and President Eisenhower portrayed the government in Guatemala as a "communist dictatorship." The U.S. ambassador to Guatemala said "we cannot permit a Soviet Republic to be established between Texas and the Panama Canal."

Arbenz wanted land reform; 70% of the arable land was owned by 2.2% of landowners. In February 1953, Arbenz expropriated 40% of United Fruit Company (UFC) property, which had close ties to the CIA. Walter Bedell, former CIA Director and Under Secretary of State, had been a UFC executive. UFC used its Washington connections to influence the government to initiate clandestine operations against the new and fragile democracy. The UFC president, Sam "The Banana Man" Zemurray, hired Washington lobbyist Thomas Corcoran to meet key Eisenhower assistants and encourage a coup. Former UFC president, Thomas Dudley, was brother of Eisenhower's first Assistant Secretary of State for Central America. J.F. Dulles had been a partner with the Sullivan & Cromwell (S&C) law firm, which represented UFC. [His brother] CIA Director Allen Dulles, was an S&C attorney doing litigation for UFC in the 1930s. Ann Whitman, Eisenhower's personal secretary, married UFC's main lobbyist. Assistant Secretary of State John Cabot owned UFC stock and his brother was a its former president.

The CIA bribed top military officers in Guatemala. They asked Arbenz to remove all communists from his administration. When he said they were no threat, he was asked to step down, but he declined. Then, the CIA deposited a large sum of money in a Swiss bank to lure him into resigning.

Allen Dulles meticulously oversaw Operation Success. In December 1953, the CIA turned to Colonel Castillo Armas who issued a decree stating his intent to overthrow Arbenz.

In the spring of 1954, the CIA stepped up covert activities. In May 1954, Arbenz turned to Czechoslovakia for military weapons in order to guard against a possible U.S. intervention. Arbenz purchased 2,000 tons of



In 1952, Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz's land reform law redistributed 1.4 million acres to more than 500,000 campesinos.

arms which were sent on a Swedish ship, Alfhem. The weapons were of little use to the Guatemalan military. They were comprised of cannons to be used when mounted on railroad cars, anti-tank guns (but there were no tanks in the area) and antiquated small arms, most of which were inoperable.

The CIA sent 30 planes to Nicaragua, Honduras and Panama, and the U.S. signed security treaties with Honduras and Nicaragua. The CIA flew planes over Guatemala with Soviet markings. On June 18, CIA planes dropped leaflets demanding Arbenz's resignation, while CIA radio stations broadcast the same message. The CIA distributed over 100,000 pamphlets entitled "Chronology of Communism in Guatemala" and made three films critical of Arbenz. Over 27,000 anti-Arbenz posters and cartoons were distributed in Guatemala. In Nicaragua, the CIA used [U.S.-installed dictator] Somoza to make a statement that Soviet weapons were being secretly imported and that Nicaragua was on the verge of falling to communism.

The White House gave the CIA the approval to wage an open war against Guatemala. U.S. planes bombed ports, military sites, airports, schools and villages. The CIA broadcast disinformation claiming that rebels had seized villages and that Arbenz was being toppled. The UFC claimed that the Arbenz government was brutal and repressive, and pub-

lished fabricated pictures of mutilated bodies in mass graves. The CIA dropped hundreds of dummy parachutes to convince Guatemalans that a major U.S. invasion was imminent, that the Guatemalan military had collapsed and that any resistance was futile.

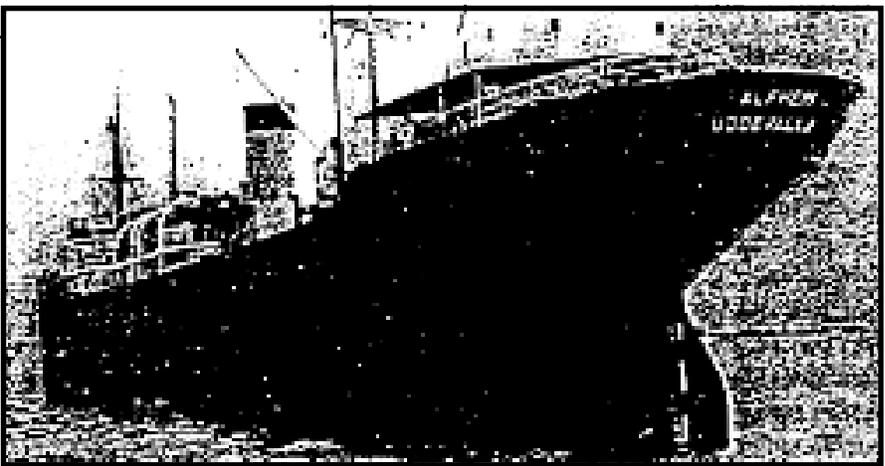
In the U.S., the Eisenhower administration disseminated stories that Arbenz had arbitrarily imprisoned thousands of political prisoners. The White House attempted to block the UN Security Council from forming a committee to seek the truth about the Arbenz government. The resolution was defeated by a 5-4 vote.

The CIA resorted to dropping several dud bombs in Honduras. Believing that these sorties were flown by Guatemalan planes, Honduras filed complaints with the UN and the Organization of American States.

The coup was close to success when senior Guatemalan army officers issued an ultimatum to Arbenz. He had to choose between resigning and the military collaborating with the CIA. One army officer was paid \$60,000 by the CIA to surrender his command. The CIA was broadcasting that the invaders were on the verge of marching into Guatemala City. Colonel Castillo Armas was nearing the capital; but with only a handful of soldiers. The CIA bombed a British oil tanker that they believed would deliver fuel for Arbenz's military vehicles. Finally, Guatemala's foreign minister attempted to strike a deal with the State Department, while the CIA continued to bomb economic targets and civilians. His pleas went unheard. U.S. planes bombed a military base and destroyed the government radio station.

On June 20, 1954, Armas entered Guatemala City in a station wagon with about 140 soldiers in a few trucks. The U.S. placed him in power and he immediately rescinded the land reform program. The land once owned by the United Fruit Company was returned. The banana workers' unions, peasant organizations and political parties, were immediately banned. Three-fourths of the population, those making up the lower rungs of society, were prohibited from voting.

Source: Excerpt, *Unleashing the CIA Across the Globe*, <www.angelfire.com/ca3/jphuck/Book16Ch.12.html>



On May 17, 1954, the U.S. State Department announced that arms had arrived from Czechoslovakia to Guatemala on the Swedish ship *Alfhem*. Washington failed to admit that because of an embargo implemented by the U.S. and its allies, Guatemala couldn't obtain defensive weaponry from anywhere else. Shortly after the *Alfhem* incident, the U.S. Air Force airlifted war materials to Honduras and Nicaragua that aided Castillo Armas, to enter Guatemala from Honduras on June 19 [after which he took power in a CIA-organized coup].

Source: Excerpt, Melissa Coy, "Bananas and Communism: The Guatemalan Coup, 1954," <people.westminstercollege.edu/faculty/mmarkowski/example.htm>

Arms Shipments on the Alfhem

By U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961).

In May things came to a head. On May 17, [Secretary of State] Dulles reported to the press that the U.S. had reliable information on a shipment of arms [to Guatemala] from behind the Iron Curtain. The arms had been loaded on the *Alfhem*, a Swedish ship chartered by a British company, at an East German port... We learned that the cargo contained 2,000 tons of small arms, ammunition and light artillery pieces manufactured in... Czechoslovakia. This quantity far exceeded any legitimate, normal requirements for the Guatemalan armed forces.

On May 19, Nicaragua broke diplomatic ties with Guatemala. Five days later we announced that the U.S. was airlifting arms to Honduras and Nicaragua to help counter the danger created by the Czech shipment to Guatemala. Our initial shipment comprised only fifty tons of rifles, pistols, machine guns, and ammunition, hardly enough to create apprehension in neighboring states.

Source: *Mandate for Change, The White House Years, 1953-1956* (1963). <azimuth.harcourtcollege.com/history/ayers/chapter28/28.3.guatemala.html>

By John Kyle Day, History Department, University of Missouri-Columbia.

When the Arbenz government's purchase of arms from Warsaw Pact member Czechoslovakia was discovered aboard the freighter *Alfhem* in May 1954, it set off a wave of protest from both the U.S. government and the American media. Most within the U.S. media agreed with *Time's* assessment that Guatemala's purchase of arms "amounted to the Red bloc's first public display of big-brotherly trust and confidence" that a communist state could be successfully established in Central America (May 31, 1954). Paul Kennedy of the *New York Times* stated: "People from Panama to the southern Mexican border have...been asking themselves...whether now is the time they have been expecting and dreading – the beginning of an all-out Communist expansion from a Guatemalan bridgehead" (May 23, 1954).

Clearly the U.S. used the *Alfhem* arms shipment as the pretext for the launch of "Operation Success."

Source: "The U.S. Media and the Guatemalan Coup d'etat of 1954," *DelaWare Review of Latin American Studies*, Dec. 15, 2000. <www.udel.edu/LASP/Vol2-1Day.html#bridgehead>